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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000105

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SUBJECT: STILL REUNIFYING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS:
THE NEW HO CHI MINH HIGHWAY

REF: A. HANOI 064 B. HANOI 051 C. HANOI 020

- D. 01 HANOI 3086

1. (U) Summary. Construction of a new major highway system designed further to link northern and southern Vietnam and to increase access to mountainous areas is underway. The portion through central Vietnam is largely completed -- with some major exceptions -- and provincial and local officials are optimistic about its impact on economic and social development in these poor areas. Environmental concerns -- notably landslides, flooding, and forest degradation -- are likely to remain problems. New inflows of migrants may also heighten ethnic tensions over land tenure. Increased narcotics smuggling from Laos and Cambodia may also prove to be a growing issue. Despite problems, the new highway should improve domestic transportation links, increase access to electricity and social services, and contribute to the GVN's goals of national unity and solidarity. End summary.

2. (U) Little in Vietnam's geography -- with its thin, lengthy shape often intersected by rugged mountainous areas -- or its colonial history -- during which the French divided up Vietnam into Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina -- or its mid-20th century civil war provided much of a basis for genuine national unification or reunification. Its often-disastrous economic and social policies in the first decade after 1975 were bitterly divisive and led to major refugee outflows. Only since the introduction of "doi moi" in 1986, the military pull-out from Cambodia in the late 1980s, and the quest for international donor assistance and foreign investment beginning in the early 1990s has the GVN pursued a more genuinely successful push for fuller national integration and the building of a new national identity.

3. (U) Ref D described the limitations of National Route No. 1, the sole major vehicular artery linking the various regions of Vietnam, often in literal parallel with the sole north-side rail link. In an effort to expand regional links, reduce transport reliance on Route 1, and open up new areas for cultivation and population, the GVN has initiated an ambitious program to turn the wartime "Ho Chi Minh Trail" into a modern highway. By 2010, the new road is expected to run from Cao Bang province (along the China border) to Ca Mau, at Vietnam's southern tip. Construction crews are still putting the final touches on the central stage between Nghe An and Kontum provinces. Pol/C and ConGenoff recently traveled along this stretch and met with provincial and local officials and residents (refs a-c report on substantive discussions).

The provincial views

4. (U) According to Ha Tinh provincial officials, the new highway should be a spur to economic development of the western highland areas of the province, despite some concerns already about environmental degradation. New access to markets and new contact with other provinces are also expected to help decrease the rate of poverty in these formerly inaccessible areas, they noted. Quang Tri officials separately admitted new environmental problems -- notably landslides, building in forested areas -- but claimed actively to be undertaking measures to mitigate these "negative influences." They, too, cited new market access by highlanders as having a big economic and social boost for local living standards. In addition, the process of building the highway has made it easier to provide access to electricity and communications, with many highland families newly able to watch television and follow national broadcasting.

5. (U) Dong Giang district officials in Quang Nam province pointed to drastically shortened travel times within the province and between Quang Nam and other provinces as a real boon to local life and to improvements of rural incomes. They said that they were now "wholeheartedly" trying to take advantage of these transport links to promote economic and social development. In Kontum, where the new Ho Chi Minh Highway comes to a rather abrupt end in the northwestern district of Ngoc Hoi (it then rejoins an existing local road), officials called the continuation of this project between 2004 and 2010 as the "next step" in provincial development, for which major

amounts of assistance from the central government will be necessary. They claimed not to know the specific timetable for onward construction, however. Officials in neighboring Gia Lai province described the next phase of the Ho Chi Minh Highway as due to start in 2006, with an upgrade of the existing two lane road rather than a new highway per se, and predicted that by 2010, the completed Ho Chi Minh Highway would have a "big impact" on economic development in this poor province. They said that, ultimately, it should be possible to travel by car from Cao Bang to Ca Mau in only three days.

New "Youth Villages"

16. (U) As part of the opening of mountainous areas, the GVN has already established four "Youth Villages" in Nghe An (Song Ro), Ha Tinh (Phuc Trach), Quang Binh (An Ma), and Quang Nam (A So) provinces. These amount to rural homesteading, with participants each receiving a plot of land usually ranging from 3-5 hectares, some assistance in the construction of modest housing, access to new health and school facilities, and agricultural extension advice. Emboffs visited the sites in Quang Binh and Quang Nam, both of which got underway in 2001.

17. (U) The An Ma project now has about 120 households -- all ethnic Kinh -- who primarily are engaged in the cultivation of black pepper (increasingly, one of Vietnam's major agricultural exports). Officials claimed that all were originally residents of the district and did not come from other provinces, and that "there was nothing here" before the project began -- no residents, no cultivation, no roads. They emphasized that participation was "100 pct voluntary," and that membership in the Youth Federation was not a requirement, although the Federation provided some financial assistance. They also claimed that most participants were graduates of senior high school (note: which would be a surprise in this poor, remote district. end note).

18. (U) The A So project only has 40 households so far, but aims at 150 families by 2005. Its population is mixed 50/50 between ethnic Kinh and the predominant local minority, Ka Tu. Project officers also stressed that all residents were "volunteers" and were almost all from the district originally. (Several of the Kinh residents admitted that, while they grew up in this district, their home provinces were in the North, but their parents had come to Quang Nam to work after 1975.) Party or Youth Federation was not/not a prerequisite, officials insisted. They admitted that there had been "some" ethnic minority families living on this site previously, but said that those families had "donated" their land and moved elsewhere. One ethnic Ka Tu young father described his family's home closer to the Lao border, about a three hour walk from A So. Like in An Ma, black pepper is or will be the major crop, and project officials will provide marketing assistance, relying in part on the new access made possible by the adjacent Ho Chi Minh Highway.

Comment: Troubles ahead but good news, too

19. (U) While the portion of the Ho Chi Minh Highway through central Vietnam is essentially finished, emboffs ran into several chokepoints, especially in Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue, and Quang Nam. In some places, the paved highway was not yet in place, although newspaper reports had claimed that the road was ready in this zone. Huge swatches of muddy clay -- in some cases, several feet deep -- occasionally blocked the route. In other locations, landslides have covered already-completed sections, with road crews desperately trying to keep up by plowing their way through for the still only-occasional traffic. In other places, rockslides covered half the road, which remained nonetheless passable. Given the location and as-of-yet lack of retaining walls, vegetation cover, or other protective measures, such landslides and rockslides are likely to remain impediments to safe and predictable travel along this route for the foreseeable future.

110. (U) The opening up of new areas for cultivation, in addition to deforestation, is likely also to rekindle local sensitivities about "outsiders" moving into originally ethnic enclaves -- unless local and provincial authorities are vigilant (and honest) about only granting land use rights to genuinely local residents. More probably, however, sometimes semi-nomadic ethnic groups may again feel squeezed off lands they had periodically used until now, potentially adding to ethnic tensions.

111. (U) Once the highway begins to carry more traffic, there is the probability that it will increasingly be a route for traffickers en route to Ho Chi Minh City carrying

narcotics from Laos and/or Cambodia (and, eventually, from China as well). Other types of smuggling -- already common in these under-patrolled areas -- will also likely increase. The need for vigilance along this road will further stretch public security and customs resources.

112. (U) But the bottom line is that Vietnam does indeed need another north-south link to complement the busy and often dangerous Route One along the coast. The existence of an alternative road will be a boost for domestic trade and transport, and should indeed promote higher living standards in these areas. The impact of the new highway on greater internal mobility, more access to electricity and communications as well as social services, and heightened trade opportunities will all advance the GVN's overarching interest in promoting greater national unity and solidarity -- as well as provide yet another tribute to "Uncle Ho," whose 100th birthday Vietnam will celebrate in 2005.
BURGHARDT